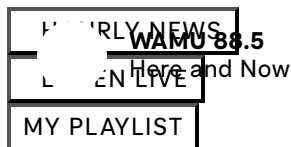
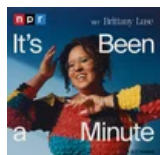


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IT'S BEEN A MINUTE

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< Drake and Kendrick are beefing, but who pays? Plus, moms as our social safety net

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39-Minute Listen

PLAYLIST

TRANSCRIPT

BRITTANY LUSE, HOST:

Hello, hello. I'm Brittany Luse, and you're listening to IT'S BEEN A MINUTE from NPR, a show about what's going on in culture and why it doesn't happen by accident.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

LUSE: A quick warning - this segment includes mention of domestic violence, pedophilia and sexual abuse. This week, we're connecting the dots between 47 minutes of music, the meanest rap lines maybe ever and a Pulitzer Prize winner. How are all these things connected? Well, we're gonna find out with NPR's Sidney Madden and writer Tirhakah Love. Sidney, Tirhakah, welcome to IT'S BEEN A MINUTE.

SIDNEY MADDEN, BYLINE: What's up, Brittany?

TIRHAKAH LOVE: It's good to be here.

LUSE: And boy, do we have a lot to unpack here. I barely even want to go here just considering some of the subject matter, but someone has got to call out all these men involved for the mess they have made. I'm obviously talking about Drake and Kendrick Lamar, who have been going at each other for weeks, multiple at this point, on diss track after diss track. And this past week, things definitely escalated. I don't even know if escalated captures what went down. What word would each of you use to describe the back and forth between them and where we're at now?

MADDEN: Ooh.

(LAUGHTER)

LUSE: You're both, like, kind of grimacing, like, (vocalizing).

LOVE: A little disconcerting.

LUSE: Yeah.

MADDEN: The first word that comes to my mind because of how much dirt has been unearthed right now is really just like, ooh, uncomfortable. Cringy.

LUSE: Yeah. Yeah, I think those are both two very, very apt words to describe the moment that we're in right now with this beef. So to catch those of you up who may not be aware, between Drake and Kendrick Lamar, we're talking about nine diss tracks - 47 minutes of music, basically a whole album's worth of content. I'll never get that time back.

(LAUGHTER)

LUSE: I'll never get that time back. I mean, there are deep references, sly footnotes and great punches next to extremely low blows. And a lot of outlets have done a track by track breakdown, and we're not here to do that today. We're here to talk about who the two biggest rappers have left in the wreckage - starting with women. Sidney, you and I both have been talking about how Kendrick and Drake are using women in pretty awful ways in these songs. What are they saying?

MADDEN: Ooh, they're saying a whole lot. Misogynoir seems to be the running theme in upping the ante in a lot of rap beefs. In these, it really is the skeleton key to getting the hardest hits on there. So one of Drake's hardest shots at Kendrick is

basically saying, you talk about all this pro-Black, free the slaves, Pulitzer Prize winner Kenny (vocalizing) when low key, you really prefer white women, and you never had any intention of marrying your light-skin Black wife, and you've actually beat on her before.

And then, in a rebuttal, Kendrick has been coming at Drake repeatedly now by saying, not only are you a culture vulture and you treat Black women disposably. You have a penchant for underage girls, as does other people in your crew. And some of these things have been fact-checked, like Baka Not Nice, who's a rapper in Drake's crew, who was convicted of assaulting a young woman and who was accused of running a prostitution ring. So you can see on both sides, it's very much women left in the wake to pick up the pieces about all the dirt that these men have done - allegedly.

LUSE: Allegedly, yes.

MADDEN: Yeah, I got to put the allegedly in there.

LUSE: A heavy allegedly. As you've mentioned, this isn't new. I mean, using women as pawns when thinking about, like, "The Bridge Is Over" with KRS-One and Roxanne Shante. Something else that's also not new is both Kendrick and Drake leaning on homophobia, sometimes transphobia in their back and forth. It's low. It's embarrassing. You know, we see it way too much still in hip-hop. But Tirhakah, you think there's also something new here.

LOVE: Listen. I don't know if there's ever been a time where a rap superstar, where two rap superstars are contemporaries, and one is accusing the other of pedophilia, like, in the loudest possible way.

MADDEN: Real loud.

LUSE: Yeah.

LOVE: And we all know the stories of him going to girls' basketball games. And it's in our faces, just like it's in our faces for a lot of different industries when it comes to this sort of behavior. But contemporaries, people who are making their record label billions of dollars, right? - that doesn't usually happen. And so this level of allegation - maybe it should inspire some sort of investigation. For the most part, it has inspired a discourse, but outside of that, it's inspired a lot of fun, right? Like, it's inspired a lot of...

LUSE: Yeah.

LOVE: ...Like, people going out to the club and listening to this song.

LUSE: Yeah. It's been a lot for my brain to handle seeing all of these, like, TikTok videos of people making up dances or being in the club, just turning up to this song, you know, that has this lyric, you know, "Certified Lover Boy"? Certified pedophile.

MADDEN: Certified pedophile.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "NOT LIKE US")

KENDRICK LAMAR: (Singing) "Certified Lover Boy?" Certified pedophiles. Wop, wop, wop, wop, wop.

LUSE: And I'm like, do y'all want to shout that in the club?

MADDEN: Yeah.

LOVE: (Laughter).

LUSE: I don't know. I don't know how I feel about that one. Sidney, it's unclear right now if the claims of Kendrick Lamar's domestic abuse are true. But let's talk more about these allegations around Drake. Tirhakah, as you mentioned, there are some things that we've seen and heard over the years. It's kind of wild that this has been in the atmosphere for some time. But no one has previously called out Drake in this way.

MADDEN: Yeah.

LUSE: What do you make of all this?

MADDEN: Well, what we know in this rap beef is it's only cool and in vogue to call out someone's misogynoir when it benefits you to grandstand. A lot of hip-hop feminists have been very vigilant and vocal about this for a long time. But now it's being raised to a more mainstream conversation because it's a hit that Kendrick is making. There have been many people who've seen Drake buddy up to young Hollywood stars in the past.

LUSE: Yeah. Millie Bobby Brown.

LOVE: Yeah.

MADDEN: Billie Eilish. And when Millie Bobby Brown was 13, she met Drake at a concert. He was 30 or 31 at the time. From there, they started a friendship where she would post Instagram photos by him. She said they would text a lot in interviews, and they maintain this friendship where he would give her advice about boys, stuff like that.

LUSE: And this was spoken about in interviews.

LOVE: This was very loud.

MADDEN: Proudly.

LUSE: Yeah.

LOVE: Yes.

MADDEN: Now add on the proximity to celebrity...

LOVE: Yes.

MADDEN: ...On top of that, Drake being this huge, ephemeral, biggest pop star rapper in the world, some would argue. It's a recurring theme that a lot of people have clocked but a lot of mainstream or, let's say, like, hip-hop gatekeepers have let slide for a really long time because either they doing the dirt themselves, or they want to be close to Drake's shine.

LOVE: It's amazing to me because, you know, a lot of times we'll call things out, and when we have, like, conversations around accountability and things of that nature, it's really difficult for people who are not in those circles to hold someone like Drake accountable, right? So when Kendrick is saying, hey, LeBron, hey, Steph, keep your kids from around this man, that's kind of big. These are people within their circles. You can't be accountable to anyone who is not in community with you.

LUSE: When I think about the allegations that have been, you know, lobbed back and forth, this is some serious stomach-turning stuff.

LOVE: Yeah.

LUSE: And to be clear, at this point, there is no evidence that Drake has committed a crime.

LOVE: Yeah.

LUSE: But this gets into some of the recent conversation about whether or not rap lyrics are just art or if these statements from Kendrick be cause for an actual criminal investigation. Where does this fall in the debate of art versus life?

MADDEN: It's so interesting. I mean, this is the time we live in right now because while all this, you know, motions hugely vaguely over here is happening, Young Thug's trial, the YSL trial is also going on in Atlanta...

LUSE: Right.

MADDEN: ...In Georgia right now. And the big key in the prosecution's case is a lot of Thug's rap lyrics being used against him. On Louder Than A Riot, we did a big deep dive about the historical roots of how rap lyrics have been used really as a racist motivator in so many ways, right? So that's where it gets really sticky 'cause you got to have something other than the lyrics, so you've got to have receipts. I do think it's important that this is happening, and this is being called out on such a big stage because I'm reminded of how R. Kelly had accusations against him for such a long time. And people are still playing "Step In The Name Of Love" at their weddings.

LUSE: All the time. Yeah, all the time.

MADDEN: But the turning point of, again, media really changed the conversation. That was the turning point that got R. Kelly out of his record deal. That is when a lot of accusations were mobilized on, and there was cases brought against him and he was ultimately found guilty of. And so this is the thing about art imitating life and life influencing the art. Like, it can have those ripple effects. It can have those repercussions. But right now, like, it's not clear yet that that is going to happen.

LOVE: It takes journalists and reporters to do this, and we can see, like, in hip-hop journalism and those type of things as being defunded, as being destroyed. I do wonder who has the actual labor power to do that. It took - what's his name who did R. Kelly?

LUSE: Are you talking about Jim DeRogatis?

LOVE: DeRogatis, yeah.

LUSE: The Chicago reporter.

LOVE: Fifteen years. Like, he was going in for a long time.

LUSE: A long time, long time. Zooming out and taking, like, a longer view of this, one thing I can't help but think about is the #MeToo movement and how all of that plays into this. For a long time, you know, myself and other journalists have wondered when hip-hop and the music industry will have its own reckoning.

MADDEN: (Sighing).

LUSE: Sidney, I know you're sighing because you've done years' worth of reporting (laughter) on this exact topic.

MADDEN: Yeah.

LUSE: In the last six months, we've seen Diddy facing lawsuits by multiple people alleging sex trafficking, sexual abuse and rape, which he has completely denied. But Diddy is from a past generation. Drake and Kendrick are today's figures. What do you all make of this as a potential opening of, like, a can of #MeToo for a new generation or new generations of men, particularly in hip-hop?

MADDEN: The thing is, the pathway's been open. Like, we've been talking about this for so long. And thank you for shouting out the reporting we did on Louder in season two for it because we really did just show how it's a running throughline. And in that reporting, we spoke to Tarana Burke, who coined the term #MeToo. Tarana is a big hip-hop...

LOVE: Yeah.

MADDEN: ...Fan, actually, too.

LUSE: Right, right.

MADDEN: And she made the observation that just crystallized why the #MeToo movement has not been able to, like, penetrate hip-hop in the same way. It's because hip-hop has been fashioned as a liberatory space for Black people,

specifically Black men. And if you think about society writ large, there's not that many places where Black people's voices, Black men's voices are prioritized and lifted up and championed. And the Black cis male agenda is the one that is always pushed to the forefront. Anyone who is not part of that group - it leaves them on the wayside. So I don't want to be pessimistic. I think this is a huge moment. This is a huge opportunity. But as a culture, the opportunities have been there. And it's, like, slip by before.

LOVE: Yeah.

LUSE: We will see. We will see. But Sidney and Tirhakah, I have learned so much here from talking to you both. Thank you both so much. I really appreciate it.

LOVE: Thank you.

MADDEN: Thank you.

LUSE: And as a thank you to both of you...

(LAUGHTER)

LUSE: ...I would like to teach you something by playing a game with you all. Can you stick around for a tiny bit longer?

LOVE: Of course.

MADDEN: No, I got to go. I got to go, Brittany.

(LAUGHTER)

LUSE: Oh, no.

MADDEN: Yes, of course.

LUSE: All right. Well, we'll be right back with a little game I like to call But Did You Know? Stick around.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

LUSE: All right. All right. We're going to play a little game I like to call But Did You Know?

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

LUSE: Here's how it works. I'm going to share a story that's been making headlines this week. And as I give you some background on the story, I'll also ask you trivia related to it. But don't worry. It is all multiple choice. So the right answer is in there somewhere. And the first one to blurt out the right answer gets a point. The person with the most points wins. Are ya'll ready?

LOVE: What do we win?

LUSE: Bragging rights (laughter). That's the only prize.

(LAUGHTER)

LUSE: This is public media, Tirhakah.

MADDEN: Tirhakah with a real question.

(LAUGHTER)

LOVE: I just want to know.

LUSE: This past week was the first Monday in May, which means the Met Gala, Anna Wintour's annual fashion expo, featuring a red carpet - I think this year might have been green and white, but you know what I mean - with the who's-who A-listers of the moment dressing up in the most attention-seeking fashion all on a single theme. This year's theme was The Garden of Time, whatever that means. And I'll say, judging by some of the outfits I saw, I don't know if everybody (laughter) understood it either.

LOVE: (Laughter).

LUSE: But we're going to run through each of our favorite looks from the night and play some trivia about each of them. OK?

LOVE: Let's do it.

MADDEN: Yes.

LUSE: Let's do it. Let's do it. OK. So Sidney, you picked Zendaya as one of the best dressed of the night. She was also one of this year's hosts of the Met Gala. And

she had not one, but two red, carpet looks. And I have to say, I loved them both, as well. Obviously, Zendaya is having quite a moment, starring in two of the biggest movies so far this year, "Dune 2" and "Challengers." But before she was the it girl of the moment, she was just a 12-year-old backup dancer in a Sears commercial. Which of these other pop stars was Zendaya a backup dancer for? Was it A, Miley Cyrus; B, Selena Gomez; or C, Ariana Grande?

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

MADDEN: Ariana?

LOVE: I'm going B. I'm going B, Selena Gomez.

LUSE: So the answer is B, Selena Gomez.

(SOUNDBITE OF CORRECT ANSWER)

LUSE: One point for Tirhakah.

LOVE: Let's go.

MADDEN: Oh.

LOVE: Let's go. Let's go (laughter).

LUSE: Selena starred in a 2009 kids clothing commercial for Sears called I'm Gonna Arrive, which I'm like, already the title is not motivating me. I'm like, are you arriving?

(LAUGHTER)

LUSE: Are you on your way? I'm Gonna Arrive, which featured lyrics like, we got new T-shirts. Our looks are going to roll you. A style fire controls you.

MADDEN: Sounds like a diss track.

(LAUGHTER)

LOVE: Like, literally terrifying (laughter).

MADDEN: Right.

LUSE: I know. I was like - I don't know - I'm like, is she...

MADDEN: Control you.

LUSE: Should she get in contact with Metro Boomin?

LOVE: (Laughter).

LUSE: I don't know. So Zendaya can be seen dancing in the background of that commercial.

LOVE: I have to find this. Yeah.

MADDEN: Yeah. I need to see this commercial now.

LOVE: (Laughter).

LUSE: It's something. That's all I'll say. It's really something. All right. All right. Our next Met Gala look comes from you, Tirhakah. You picked supermodel Anok Yai, who was dripping in diamonds in this skintight, bejeweled jumpsuit. It's gorgeous. It was...

MADDEN: Yeah.

LUSE: ...Gradient blue. If you haven't seen it, you need to Google it, and Google all of her Met Gala looks.

MADDEN: Gorgeous.

LOVE: I mean, just perfect.

LUSE: Literally, a perfect human being walking on Earth.

LOVE: (Laughter).

LUSE: OK. So for those who don't know, Anok is a supermodel - a super-duper model - with a very special line on her resume. After Naomi Campbell, she is the first Black model to lead a runway for which of these fashion houses?

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

LUSE: Is it A, Balmain; B, Chanel; or C, Prada?

LOVE: Oh.

MADDEN: I'm going to say Chanel.

LUSE: Sidney says Chanel. Tirhakah, what do you say?

LOVE: I'm trying to think, who's the most racist?

LUSE: (Laughter).

MADDEN: That's why I'm like, who would take the longest to do this, you know?

LOVE: I'm going to go Prada.

LUSE: Well, the answer is C, Prada.

(SOUNDBITE OF CORRECT ANSWER)

LOVE: Wow.

LUSE: Yes.

LOVE: Let's go. ***

MADDEN: You killing it.

LOVE: (Laughter).

LUSE: Fun fact - Anok was discovered at Howard University homecoming...

MADDEN: Yes.

LUSE: ...When this guy took a photo of her that went viral.

LOVE: It's so random.

MADDEN: Yeah. And that jump-started her modeling career.

LUSE: It jump-started...

MADDEN: Like..

LUSE: ...Her modeling career.

MADDEN: That is such amazing Black history.

LUSE: I know.

LOVE: (Laughter).

LUSE: I know. All right. But to recap the score (laughter)...

MADDEN: You don't got to recap the score, Brittany.

LOVE: No, let's run that back. Let's run that back. Let's do it.

LUSE: (Laughter) Sidney, you are at zero points - for now. And, Tirhakah, you're at two points. OK? So without further ado, my choice for favorite look at the Met Gala goes to the R&B singer Tyla, who was so on theme for The Garden of Time by wearing a dress made of literal sand.

MADDEN: Yes. The sands of time.

LUSE: She looked like she had descended from the beach, OK?

LOVE: I mean, she ate it. She did eat. She did eat.

LUSE: She really did...

MADDEN: Yeah.

LUSE: ...Eat.

MADDEN: Especially for her first...

LOVE: Right.

MADDEN: ...Met.

LUSE: Right.

MADDEN: And, like, she's like, I am making an entrance. You're going to know...

LOVE: That's right.

MADDEN: ...My name.

LUSE: There was this moment where, like, she - I mean, understandably, a dress made of sand is not exactly...

LOVE: How you moving?

LUSE: ...Easy to move around in.

LOVE: (Laughter).

LUSE: So she had to get lifted up.

MADDEN: Lifted, hoisted each step.

LUSE: Hoisted each step. I was like, wow. As she was being lifted, it was like she was able to kind of, like - almost like a ballerina - kind of keep her same...

MADDEN: Yeah.

LUSE: ...Posture.

MADDEN: Give face, still.

LUSE: Exactly. I mean, I would've crawled in the fetal position...

LOVE: (Laughter).

LUSE: ...If someone had picked me up. I would have been like, oh, carry me. But before she was my red carpet winner and an R&B singer, Tyla was a university student, just like many people out there, OK? What was Tyla studying before she dropped out to pursue music?

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

MADDEN: Oh, my gosh.

LUSE: Was it A, mining engineering; B, computer science; or C, oceanography?

LOVE: I'm going A. I'm going A.

LUSE: Tirhakah says A. What say you, Sidney?

MADDEN: I'm going to say computer science. Oh, my God.

LUSE: The answer is A, mining engineering.

(SOUNDBITE OF CORRECT ANSWER)

MADDEN: Yeah.

LOVE: Let's go.

LUSE: Tirhakah, a sweep. I think this actually might be the first sweep that we've ever had playing...

MADDEN: Oh, my...

LUSE: ...This game.

MADDEN: ...God.

LOVE: Let's talk about domination.

LUSE: (Laughter).

LOVE: Let's talk about winning.

LUSE: You better be careful, though. If you gloat just a little too much, Sidney will release a diss track.

LOVE: (Laughter).

LUSE: She will release a diss track.

MADDEN: I got it ready.

LUSE: She will.

LOVE: Oh, you think you know pop culture? Let's play a game of Have You Ever?

(LAUGHTER)

LUSE: All right. That is it for today's edition of But Did You Know? Congratulations to Tirhakah on your win.

MADDEN: (Laughter).

LUSE: And, Sidney, girl, one day, you will be back.

MADDEN: I don't think so.

LUSE: And I have faith.

LOVE: (Laughter).

LUSE: You will be back. You will be back. I have faith. I have faith. Well, both of you, Sidney, Tirhakah, thank you so much for joining me today. It was so great to have you.

LOVE: This was really fun. Thank you.

MADDEN: Thank you, Brittany.

LUSE: That was NPR's Sidney Madden and writer Tirhakah Love. I'm going to take a quick break, and when I get back, I'm celebrating Mother's Day by looking at how moms became America's social safety net and why that's bad for all of us.

MADDEN: Ooh. I want to hear that. I want to hear it.

LUSE: (Laughter) We had to bring it for Mother's Day.

LOVE: Respect. Respect.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

LUSE: My big question this week is how does our culture push women into patching our social safety net?

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

LUSE: This weekend, many people will be celebrating Mother's Day - and for good reason. Lots of moms out there do the most. Thinking about my own mom - I mean, she was my Girl Scout troop leader. She made Halloween costumes by hand. It's hard for me to think of anything she didn't do for my sisters and me. But my next guest, Dr. Jessica Calarco, thinks that women and mothers are asked to do too much. She thinks our country has kind of replaced a safety net with women. I know - big statement. But what exactly does a safety net do?

JESSICA CALARCO: The point of a social safety net is essentially to help people manage risks. And so from that perspective, a sturdy social safety net would include policies that essentially help protect people from falling into poverty.

LUSE: These policies might be government-provided health care, child care, elder care - things that are, for a lot of people, prohibitively expensive. We do have some of these programs, like Medicare, Social Security and SNAP. But Dr. Calarco says, with over 30 million Americans still living in poverty, they're nowhere near enough.

CALARCO: In the U.S., we instead have what we might think of as a DIY society, where people are expected to manage risks on their own instead of relying on a government safety net to help support them.

LUSE: Dr. Calarco's new book called "Holding It Together" is about how in lieu of a safety net, women are burdened most with managing those risks - and mothers most of all. But why don't we do anything about it? Well, our culture has some deeply rooted beliefs and myths about women - myths it's time to examine. So I sat down with Dr. Calarco to expose them and to hear about how things could work a little differently.

Dr. Calarco, welcome to IT'S BEEN A MINUTE.

CALARCO: Thank you so much for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

LUSE: Oh, it's great to have you. So we're going to get into some myths today. But first, we're going to spend some time laying out what you mean by safety net on a policy level. When you're talking about an ideal safety net in the United States, what does that look like?

CALARCO: Yeah. So essentially, a stronger social safety net would ensure that everyone in society can live with dignity from birth through natural death. And so one key step in that process involves protecting people from parity - things like raising the minimum wage, increasing worker protections, expanding welfare and food stamp programs and making them less punitive. Another key step is to make care a public good rather than a private luxury, so creating universal public systems for things like health care and child care and elder care and funding that system to the level where the care provided is both reliable and sustainable. And then there's always going to be a need for unpaid informal care between people.

LUSE: Things that, like, a community or a family would provide for each other.

CALARCO: Exactly. And we can put in place policies to strengthen that work, too - things like guaranteed paid sick leave, paid family leave, laws that prevent employers from penalizing workers for requesting accommodations related to care. Those kinds of policies can help to ensure that all of us are available and have the resources and support that we need to do to be part of those community and family projects of supporting each other and to do so without risking our own well-being or our own financial security in the process.

LUSE: OK. So no matter what people might think about all that, I think many parents would agree that good child care is expensive and hard to find. But there was a time when things could have gone another way. Can you tell that story?

CALARCO: Yeah. So essentially, during World War II, with so many men off fighting in battle, we needed as many women as possible to join the workforce back home. We decided to put in place child care centers funded through the Lanham Act.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED NEWS ANCHOR: When married women with small children have to take jobs, everything possible will be done to provide day care for the children.

CALARCO: That made it possible for mothers with young children to get the care that they needed to make it possible for them to work for pay. And the thing is, at the end of the war, we could have made those centers permanent, and we could have expanded them to all communities across the U.S. That's what many of our European allies did - places like France opting to expand the child care centers that they'd put in place during the war. Unpaid family leave policies, things like international healthcare programs - these were what many countries were pursuing in Europe after World War II. But instead, the U.S. decided to prioritize the short-term interests of the economy, which meant making room for the men who were returning from war to have jobs in our economy and pushing women back home.

And so to do that, they shuttered those child care centers. That meant that we didn't have to restructure our economy, or they'd do things like raise taxes to create a permanent safety net for women to be able to work for pay. But it also laid the groundwork for so many policies that followed because it created a

structure where it just seemed natural and logical to rely on women to fill in these gaps, both in our social safety net and then also to be the sort of toggle switch where we can increase or decrease their employment depending on the economy's needs at any given moment in time.

LUSE: On that note, you write in your book that other countries have social safety nets. America has women. And your book is about all the ways that women are conscripted into doing that kind of work. You say that trapping women into motherhood is key to that conscription. How does that work?

CALARCO: Yeah. With a DIY society like ours, one where we expect people to manage risk on their own and especially in the context of, you know, gender myths that make it seem like women are the ones who are only capable or best capable of caring for young children, it becomes very easy for them to be conscripted into doing the unpaid labor at home of caring for children. And then once they're caring for children, it becomes easy to say, well, if she's already at home, she can care for grandma, too.

LUSE: You describe it as exploitation. I mean, I imagine there are also many people who would like to stay home.

CALARCO: Yeah.

LUSE: What do you say to that?

CALARCO: With my research, I talked to one mom, for example, who's a low-income Black single mom working in food service, who - after her son was born, she wasn't able to take any paid time off. When the pandemic hit, she found herself unemployed all of a sudden. And this was the first time she'd ever gotten to stay home with her son. And she talked about how much of a joy it was to just get to, like, teach him how to play Connect Four and, like, watch videos with him. And I think it speaks to the fact that we need support for all of us to be able to participate in this shared project of caregiving, and that really, the system is designed to kind of force particularly low-income women into low-wage jobs, even if they'd rather be home with their families.

Women hold 70% of the lowest-wage jobs in our economy. And then at the same time, to force women, especially women who have husbands who can support

them financially, to stay home, even if they'd maybe rather be working for pay because of social pressure. So it's a system that limits choice for everyone.

LUSE: So the United States does have government assistance. But your book points out how sometimes using that assistance or that safety net can limit low-income families.

CALARCO: Yeah. So in the U.S., we do have a social safety net. It's just a threadbare one. And it's one that is wrapped in all sorts of punitive restrictions designed to force people to prove that they are deserving of support and also to punish people for needing that support. And so what that means in practice is that - you know, things like our welfare program, for example.

In Indiana, where I did a lot of my research, the maximum that a single mom of two could qualify for for a month of cash benefits was about \$288 a month. So that's not enough money to live on. And on top of that, they have mandatory work requirements so that even if you're relying on welfare, you're required to go out and find the first job that is available to you, even if it's low paying. And then for every dollar that you earn in income, your welfare benefits get reduced.

LUSE: I want to make a turn and really get into some of the cultural myths that you say reinforce ideas that we don't need a safety net. One of them is that if you just make good choices, you won't need public assistance or you won't be living in poverty, which is an idea that goes hand in hand with what you describe as the meritocracy myth, the idea that everyone who is rich - they deserve it. Whereas poor people just aren't trying hard enough. According to Pew, more than 70% of American adults believe most people will succeed if they work hard, way more than a country like France, where the majority think hard work is no guarantee of success. How does that belief keep us from wanting to invest in a stronger safety net?

CALARCO: Sure. So, I mean, I think this idea of meritocracy, that if we just work hard enough, we will be able to get ahead despite the kinds of challenges that we face - it's really baked into the American ethos. But what research tells us is that just because someone has made those, quote-unquote, "good choices" - which in our society, it's often things like, you know, wait to have children until you get married and finish school...

LUSE: Sure.

CALARCO: ...And get a high-paying job or major in, you know, engineering - even if people make those kinds of choices, it's not that those choices are what's necessarily guaranteeing people success. It's that the people who are in the position to make those good choices are often people with privilege to spare. It's not that, you know, hard work doesn't matter at all. But it's only one part of the equation. The problem, though, is that when we tell women, you know, just make these good choices and everything will turn out fine, it leads us to feel like we're the problem, that there must be something wrong with us.

LUSE: Keeping that in mind, how does this meritocracy myth you describe square with America's history of racism and the state of our safety nets?

CALARCO: Yeah. I mean, I think the myth of meritocracy plays a key role in maintaining racial divisions and racism in our society in terms of encouraging particularly working-class and middle-class white Americans to perceive themselves as morally superior to those people who they perceive as worse off than they are - in terms of low-income Black Americans buying into this myth of meritocracy - allows people to feel like, oh, because I don't need that social safety net, I must be harder working. I must be a better person.

You could imagine a world where people who fall just above the line for some of these programs - Medicaid and welfare - would instead say, hey, let's expand these programs. This would benefit my family, too. And people from systematically marginalized groups who believe the myth of meritocracy - they actually have worse health outcomes. They have, you know, worse cardiovascular health because they buy into these ideas. And it causes internal stress in the sense of seeing themselves as the problem and blaming themselves for not being willing to work hard enough or being able to achieve those successes compared to people who reject these myths.

LUSE: That dynamic that you're describing reminds me of another dynamic in your book that you describe in a similar fashion. And that is the Mars-Venus myth - in other words, the idea that women are naturally suited for care work and men are naturally suited for paid work out in the world. Why might that assumption be wrong?

CALARCO: Yeah. And so research shows us that really, biology is not destiny. Even some of the anthropological work around things like hunter-gatherer societies has been recently debunked, showing that women in many of these hunter-gatherer

societies actually play - I think it's, like, a much more involved role in hunting - these kinds of myths about, you know, men go out and hunt and women stay home and tend to the fire and tend to the children - that it's not really as pat as it might seem.

If we consider the anthropological evidence, the biological evidence, the research there, too, shows that, you know, men and women are socialized into differences from a very, very early age. From the time that young girls, in particular, are old enough to hold a baby doll, they're trained to hold these kinds of caregiving roles in our society. And that means that young boys, you know, often aren't given that same kind of chance to develop their caregiving skills and aren't given the sort of positive reinforcement around those kinds of roles that girls are. And so they don't get as good at them. But at the same time, research shows that once men and boys are given the chance to learn to be good caregivers, they're just as capable of it as women are and can be highly effective in those roles and can often enjoy those roles, too.

LUSE: I want to talk about how fathers and men think about this Mars-Venus myth. In one study that you conducted, you found that compared to dads who do not believe in the Mars-Venus myth, dads who believed it were more likely to oppose safety-net programs like guaranteed paid family leave and free universal child care. Even if these dads knew they could have more money because their wives could work and they wouldn't have to pay for childcare, they still opposed these policies. What is it that these dads would lose out on if they were to let go of this myth?

CALARCO: If dads were to let go of this myth, they would lose the perks of patriarchy, which for them means being able to pass the buck, being able to rely on the women in their families to pick up the slack so that they can focus more of their energies on paid work.

I talked to one dad, for example, who I call Dennis. He's in his 30s. He's white. He has a bachelor's degree. You know, he works in tech. And he likes to think of himself as fairly egalitarian. He talked about, like, how - oh, I don't believe that 1950s stuff when it comes to gender. But when push came to shove, when it came to his own family, he wasn't willing to put his money where his mouth is in the sense that when his oldest daughter was born, at the time, Dennis' wife, Bethany (ph), was working full time as a social worker. And she was making about \$30,000

a year. And so between their two salaries, they could have afforded to pay for full-time child care for their daughter.

But he decided that it just wouldn't make sense financially for his wife, Bethany, to still be working. And he talked about it as, like, she shouldn't have to spend half of her paycheck finding care. And so he was really treating this as only a trade-off between her income and the cost of child care as opposed to recognizing that the child care is a shared project for himself and for his wife.

And in the process, like, once she was staying home full time with their children, he realized very quickly that this had perks for him, too. He talked about how he doesn't have to be the one to take a day off from work to care for the kids if there's a snow day. Bethany, meanwhile, actually wanted to go back to the workforce. But she felt pressure to stay home, in part because that's what her mom and Dennis' mom had done for them and in part because she wasn't seeing that kind of support from Dennis. She didn't see him stepping up. And so she was worried about, you know, even if I do go back to paid work, I might still be the default parent. I might still be the one who has to sacrifice.

LUSE: I remember reading in the book that she was doing so much to keep their family afloat. And that reminded me of another myth that you unpack in your book about the supermom. Can you explain what the supermom myth is?

CALARCO: Sure. So this is the idea that children are under threat and that moms are the only ones who can protect children from threats to their well-being. There's a sort of white evangelical Christian version, which focuses on the moral threats to children. And this is really driving what we see in terms of our, you know, anti-critical race theory panic or our panic around policies supporting children who are nonbinary or who are, you know, thinking of transitioning. The kind of fearmongering that we've seen around kids is very much targeted at mom. I talk in the book about a number of, you know, evangelical parenting books that are very explicitly aimed at encouraging mothers to see themselves as the protectors of children to help ensure their children's salvation.

LUSE: You say that's also something that you see with nonreligious mothers as well.

CALARCO: Absolutely. And so this is the kind of thing where it doesn't have to be the same threat to get to the same result. Even politically progressive-leaning

moms can be easily lured into feeling as though they have to be the ones to do everything because of threats to their children's status. For affluent, highly educated women, worries about downward mobility can lead mothers to feel as though they have to opportunity hoard, as though they have to intensive mother their children in ways that will prevent them from, you know, not being at the top of their class or not getting into the elite college or not getting into those kinds of jobs that will secure their futures down the line.

LUSE: You also wrote that, according to one of your studies, mothers who believe it's best for kids to have their mom at home are less supportive than other mothers of policies like free childcare and preschool for all and that those same mothers are disproportionately inclined to say that parents should make sure their own children have the best chance at being successful rather than working to ensure that all kids have an equal chance of success.

CALARCO: Exactly. And so all of these myths are designed to keep us insular in our focus. They're meant to get us to focus on what we, as individuals, can do to improve our own lives or our children's lives and to sort of not see the need for a stronger social safety net, or even to see the stronger social safety net as a threat to the kinds of privileges that we might be able to achieve for our families if we just work hard enough.

LUSE: What would a path towards a better safety net look like to you?

CALARCO: We really have to reject the myths that have helped to delude and divide us. And one way that we can think about doing that is through what I talk about as a union of care. We know from research on labor unions that when people are part of a union, they're more likely to have a sense of linked fate with other people who are part of that same union regardless of their racial differences, their class differences because it allows them to see how they can all benefit from certain policies or from certain collective efforts that they take.

LUSE: In your book, you often use Scandinavian social safety net design as an example. But when I think about the United States, I don't know, those societies are not as truly diverse as ours is, and those are also countries that are not as big as ours is. You know, given America's history with racism and given its size, I just feel like that kind of social structure would be much harder to build in the United States. What do you think about that?

CALARCO: Yeah. I think that those are certainly valid concerns. I think one thing to keep in mind is that we've actually already done this, and we've shown that it can work here. We have large-scale social safety net programs like Medicare and Social Security, and we've proven that they can work effectively. Before Medicare and Social Security were put into place, poverty was a common problem among elderly Americans. And today, because of those programs, those kinds of risks are much lower than they were before.

These programs, they're strongly supported by public opinion. And it gets at this idea that once we have these programs in place, they become highly popular, even if they're fairly costly. So I think if we are able and willing to see those larger social structures, to reject those myths, then we could better recognize how a stronger social safety net would support all of us.

LUSE: Well, Dr Calarco, it has been great to talk to you today. I've learned so much reading your book and from this conversation. Thank you.

CALARCO: Thank you so much for having me. It's been a pleasure to chat with you.

LUSE: Thanks again to Dr. Jessica Calarco. Her book is called "Holding It Together: How Women Became America's Social Safety Net." It's out on June 4.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

LUSE: This episode of IT'S BEEN A MINUTE was produced by...

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LUSE: All right. That's all for this episode of IT'S BEEN A MINUTE from NPR. I'm Brittany Luse. Talk soon.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

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